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Experimenting with a *performative* project: The Cadiz City Plan(ning) Office.

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Experimenting and teaching

Experiment 'a test or investigation, esp. one planned to provide evidence for/against a hypothesis; an attempt at something new/original'

Experimental 'based on or derived from experience; empirical; tending to experiment; tentative or provisional'¹

What kind of experiment or experimental practice is relevant to the pedagogical design studio against a backdrop of new technologies and electronic culture spliced with varying degrees of engagement and enthusiasm into, across, within existing and aspirational design culture(s)? This paper explores the benefits of experimenting with a studio methodology/pedagogy in a one-off recent Masters level architectural project, *The Cadiz City Planning Office*, which took place at the University of Edinburgh in January 2007. While this project does not ostensibly engage with digital technologies, the operational paradigm was one of vector-field-time with associated machinic transformative potential, and its essential generative potential for design in an urban context was a focus on linkages and methods rather than forms and objects. I argue that there is currently a heightened need to counter the detachment often embodied by digital design practices, which struggle to deal with the issue of context beyond reductive physical form. This project demonstrates that abstraction is not only achieved via digital processes. There is a need to critically assess the appropriate application of digital technology/information society processes in relation to understanding what it is to act as an architect in social, economic, political as well as material territory.

¹ Collins dictionary definition

In order to explore the question of design in an urban context as a collective practice which involves making, thinking, organising, implementing, the project became a game without consequences, open-ended and generative, not just an experiment testing a hypothesis. The CCPO project provoked an entirely unexpected output, augmented by an unexpected depth of student learning. It was certainly a pedagogical experiment- would the students take seriously and commit to their fictional bureaucratic city roles? Would the project grind to a halt and need tutor intervention? The objective directing this experimentation was a belief in 'uncovering' aspects of the city, which suggests new or unexpected possibilities, rather than applying pre-determined objectives. Of course much was brought implicitly to the experiment- ways of thinking, material researched, an attitude to what to look for. Our undeclared premise was a scepticism about the relevance of a resolved, unified plan, a single way of understanding or acting on or with the study city, an expectation that the brief would force negotiation in terms of process and content, and to some extent we were anticipating the project to be a glorified failure.

"The temporary removal of ownership/attachment to projects, fear of failure and responsibility created a fertile environment that allowed us to step away from individual ideas and reflect on what, as a group, we see Cádiz as, and what we want it to be."²

Fig 1 Installation of the Cadiz City Plan, photograph taken after presentation

CCPO: pedagogy and collective practice

The *Cadiz City Plan(ning) Office (CCPO)* was a short project which took place in January 2007 within the Masters Architectural Design studio at the University of Edinburgh, UK. The MArch (Design) is a two year professionally accredited programme, and is distinctive for its emphasis on an in depth pedagogy allowing students longer periods to work through carefully defined contemporary problems. The course begins with a field trip to a significant international city which forms the context for the thesis. Initial strategies for interpretation of the city are conceived and presented in techniques appropriate to the reading of the city. These territories, and the spatial, political, philosophical, cultural and material concerns that this work opens, form the focus for continuing work. The course operates within the general

² Imogen Hogg, MArch student reflecting on the project

theme of architecture in the urban context. It involves making a series of architectural projects and deals in a critical way with issues and questions of contemporary relevance³.

The current studio theme of city fieldworks is premised on a need and desire for architectural design practice to be self consciously situated. Rem Koolhaas talks of the future role of architecture as “the irrigation of territories with potential” rather than “the arrangement of more or less permanent objects”⁴. This statement provokes an exploratory approach to understanding 1. territory (*field, ground, site*) 2. what ‘potential’ might be (*programmatic attitude*) and 3. what constitute acts of ‘irrigation’ (*erasure, purging, resistance, friction, intervention, augmentation, accretion*).

Preoccupations of the studio inquiry include what city fieldworks might mean or signify in relation to territory, city, sea (productive land, site of conflict, implied expanse), *operative field* defining extents/limits of productive action, operation, observation, intellectual activity, and as metaphor/myth (*field of knowledge, field of dreams, field of the cloth of gold, killing fields*) how it is used in relation to theoretical discourse, and how these understandings may point to ways of understanding a terrain/territory (fields, zones, patches). *Urban field* is a term that is used in relation to constructed territory of or related to the city. In what context is this term used, by whom and why? What does this mean in terms of shedding light on the contemporary city and how we might act more precisely as designers/architects/urban policy makers?

Cádiz is an Atlantic city on the southwestern coast of Europe⁵. The Bahía of Cádiz, comprising the city on the isthmus and four other towns, is currently perceived of as

³ From 2006-8 MArch (Design) Course Handbook, University of Edinburgh

⁴ SMLXL (1995) ‘Whatever Happened to Urbanism?’

⁵ Cádiz was a centre of Phoenician salt trade, a Roman and Moorish city, and a key gateway for the Americas. The city has a significant history of military contest/siege/trade. The dense fabric of the old town dates primarily from the seventeenth century, the newer town was based on La Ciudad Lineal, both creating sheltered microclimates in an extremely exposed situation. The city has a reputation for political activism, being the site of the signing of the first Spanish constitution, and where Franco first entered Spain before seizing power. *Gaditanos* see themselves as outward looking *mestizos*. Today, the porous coast of Southern Spain raises issues of immigration and transculturation. At a macro scale the area is a biological crossroads of flows between Mediterranean and Atlantic waters. The port of Cádiz and other industries are still active in a Mediterranean/ North African network. Regional issues of limited water supply and protecting the ecology of the coast are pertinent, and relate to debates arising from the urbanisation of the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

one metropolitan area, raising questions of how to define *urban field* within a loose city/land/aqueous topography.

Prior to the *CCPO* project, students had undertaken small group projects, a Symposium on themes related to Cádiz, an 8 day fieldtrip, and an individual thematic design proposition. Fieldwork tools, guides and devices were consciously chosen, designed and utilised, augmenting and perhaps contradicting desk based research, as the 'space of design'⁶ shifted between a design studio in Edinburgh and less well known (to us) territory in south western Europe. Components were sequenced in order to focus on possibilities and interrelation of practices of research⁷, fieldworking and design. The pedagogical intention is that triggers for exploratory practices in Semester 1 courses are tested and developed through the more individually focused work of the second Semester. The *CCPO* was a hinge project provoked by Visiting Professor⁸, Ben Nicholson.

After this collective experiment, students mostly worked in small groups for the next 3 weeks devising and developing a crafted form of constructed or drawn representation revealing urban, spatial, material, tectonic potentials of identified territories (eg. time and urbanism, institutional control, infrastructures, shifting ground, city edges, hidden mechanisms). The project helped to clarify how students organised themselves in subsequent groups.

The brief for the *CCPO* was to work together to collate and to consolidate the 32 territories and themes identified so far by each student. The 4 Objectives were:

⁶ "The space of design continues to be defined by layers of photographs, models, Xeroxes, posters, designs, sketches, magazines, mottos, books, advertisements, fabrics, and so on, which act as fetishistic substitutes for what exists outside the studio: other places, other times, other architects, other schools and other disciplines. These tokens bring all of these issues "into" design. The designer is seen as detached from the physical space of the studio and set adrift among the conceptual space of these representations....They construct and maintain a space for architecture that is neither inside nor outside the university". Wigley, M 'Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture' *Assemblage* No, 15 (Aug 1991) (1991) p20

⁷ Key texts which were discussed in the studio included Mark Wigley, 'Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture' (ibid. 1991) p 6-29, James Corner, 'Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes' Chapter 10 pp 153-169 in *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Theory* (Princeton, 1999), Carol Burns & Andrea Kahn, *Why Site Matters*. Design Concepts, Histories and Strategies, Routledge, London, New York, 2004.

⁸ The George Simpson Professor is an annual post supporting Architectural Education at the University of Edinburgh. Ben Nicholson participated in teaching with a number of year groups in Edinburgh at the start of Semester January 2007. In the past this role has often taken the form of critical reviews of individual studio work, but this year we decided to work on a project based experiment. The idea of working on a short project was agreed in advance, although the project was actually conceived and constructed in detail through intensive discussion with the course leader and Ben Nicholson when he arrived in Edinburgh.

- To choreograph a collective City Plan
- To collate pertinent themes and aspects of urbanity (city needs & desires)
- To run an efficient open-source system supporting the making of The City Plan
- To enable the installation and presentation of The City Plan

These roughly mapped onto 4 'divisions' which the students were divided into, and instructed to work simultaneously to achieve the collective goals. The limits were temporal: Project start was 9.30am Wednesday 10th January; deadline for CCPO and City Plan launch was Thursday 18 January. Division responsibilities were set out:

- Division 1: *collagists* (Presentation of The Cadiz City Plan: The Manual Version, The Digital Version).
- Division 2: *programmers* (Presentation of Cadiz Themes of Urbanity Manual: The Manual of linkages, The Manual of absences).
- Division 3: *administrators* (Support, evaluation and monitoring the process of making The City Plan/Manuals; Finance; Communications; Records; Systems)
- Division 4: *facilities managers* (Working landscape, installation of The City Map/Manuals; Making; Documenting)

Images from Dziga Vertov's *Man with a movie Camera*, 1929, Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, 1967, Nate Salsbury at Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, Brooklyn, 1894, www.earlyofficemuseum.com, www.cisco.com were placed in the brief, and the project was introduced verbally to the studio cohort by Professor Ben Nicholson. Immediately after 2 minute presentations by each student of their previously installed work from the first Semester, the CCPO was required to negotiate a way of working collectively through the project. "The Cadiz City Plan" was presented on schedule to course tutors, Suzanne Ewing and Victoria Bernie, joined by Ben Nicholson and Professor Andrew Benjamin, also visiting the School.

Fig 2 Review discussion of the CCPO project

Student reflections on the project highlighted the significance of the collective organisation of the project:

"How a group of people choreograph themselves and motivate themselves is probably the most difficult challenge of large group projects. The matter of who is in charge or apparently telling people what to do, whose ideas you use, whose ideas you don't use and who goes to buy the coffee are the issues that become more and more insurmountable the larger the group becomes...The success of the CCPO came from the fact that everyone had a clearly defined role within the class; the four separate groups allowed all the parties to unfetter themselves from the worries of the entirety of the project allowing the project to move forward at a fast pace with interlocking system."⁹

"I found that collective work expose some extensions that individual work couldn't obtain...During these days I apprehend using "WE" as the substitute of "I"¹⁰.

"The project success lay in systematical division-of physical tasks, of responsibility, of communication and information. Where an individual or team move becomes the start, or another link, of multiple chains of action or thought-whether made with complicit understanding or, more often, without question. The piece reflects this tangibly. Each of the 32 class members could point to the part that *is* them. But it is insider knowledge, coded from the viewer."¹¹

Fig 3 Still from film of the making of the CCPO

In this project, the key experimental move in the pedagogical brief was to set up the temporary artifice of a City Planning Office- what this might be, how it might operate, how it might develop and implement Plans and other Works. It was set up as a loose role-playing scenario where makers (collagists), thinkers (programmers), organisers (administrators), and contractors (facilities managers) were set up to act together. In this sense the project was a 'performative'¹² experiment related to the enactment of practices of design in an urban context. The output became a performed installation in the studio space, a film of the making process, website

⁹ Andrew Brooks, MArch student reflecting on the project

¹⁰ Xiaoxi Song, MSc student reflecting on the project

¹¹ Emma Bush, MArch student reflecting on the project

¹² *Performative* (Collins dictionary) "denoting an utterance that itself constitutes the act described by the verb." Neil Leach refers to Judith Butler's distinction between performance and performative in 'On Belonging', pp170-202 in *Camouflage* (MIT Press, Cambs, Mass. London, 2006) "Performativity achieves its aims not through a singular performance...but through the accumulative iteration of certain practices."

pages and documentation of the communication and negotiation procedures of each Division. Students set up a School tuck shop which covered around 50% of the project costs. Presenting the collective generative script(s) and individual re-scripting became an important element of the teaching-learning process.

The still images of the project are intriguing and seductive, although require decoding as to how they came to be like this, how strategies were developed by the thinkers and makers, how the installation is 'seen' detached from the process. In the final presentation, the audience/critics were confronted with an unfolding sequence- first a performed presentation, then an invitation to explore the installed work, third a presentation of the methodology through the documents of each *CCPO* division, and finally viewing an edited film of the process. Discussion and comments followed, the silent installation remained accessible to others in the school for a few more days.

The *City Plan* evolution was described by the programmers. First written summaries of 32 individual projects were gleaned from 2 minute verbal presentations made next to their Semester 1 work. The sentence was translated to an image then coded as a single word. Then these were qualitatively positioned on a value scale of projected futures for the study territory: x=apocalyptic to elysian; y= self-sufficiency to dependency, and these became x and y coordinates plotted on 2 axes. Relationships between projects were identified and became potential vectors. A summary diagram identified a centre of gravity just off-median. The whole process was retraced with student responses to the programmers' plotting, resulting in the studio group median shifting a short way further to the elysian. Thematic sequences of coded verbs (image) and objects (text) were subsequently brought to the final installation and translated through the medium of choreographed nodes of tights/light/ tape/ found objects.

The next move was to plot the final positioning of each shifted project node. The students set up moves related to the defining and remaking of a field of vector shifts which denoted linkages between individual student projects. These were translated into 'territorial choreographies' performed as the *City Plan*.

Fig 4 Still from film of the making of the CCPO

Performing and learning

An insight into the actual process of the project was gained from the documentation produced by the Administrators, who set up a system of colour coded request/response/memo sheets which became an archive of communication between the groups. These ranged from requesting practical items to exchanging comments/queries on what was being asked for ("14.01.07 12.00 collagists to facilities managers: 1 metronome, 8 chairs without rollers, 8 pairs of white gloves, small sponge, video camera...") The Administrators also required daily feedback sheets from everyone, which included quantitatively recording morale and how time was spent. It included a question 'In one word, how would you sum up your role in the project today?'. Answers ranged from occupational descriptors (skivvy, cleaner, builder, circle maker, calculator, actor, writer, sewer, shopper, mapper, thinker, Mr Photoshop, choreographer, convenor, worker, maker, organiser, chef, planner, photographer, website-maker, note-taker, runner, CAD monkey, buyer-seller-entertainer, printer, sentence-compiler, editor) to responsive descriptors (irritator, UN peacekeeper, mediator, dreamer, talker, disaster-control, spokesman) to self critical descriptors (non-thinker, speeder-upper, paralysed, lightweight, heavyweight, dictatorial, absent, quarterback, smiling and nodding, hungover, quietly peeved, different, maths genius, an ornament, moody). Individual assessment of contribution was often detached from assessment of project progress. A visual diary of the project was also compiled.

To some extent the project was subjective at every move. In order to encourage precise critical thinking, students were asked to write short written reflections on 'What went on in the CCPO project /presentation?' Comments covered the actual process of the project, attempting to name it, an appropriation of relevance to individual work, and an interpretation of the value of the project (as success/failure). Most were written in the first person, a few chose third person narrative.

Process:

"Which is the most important issue, operating the office or designing the plan?"¹³

relation to the politics of mimicry, and space and place.

¹³ Jessica Ji, MArch student

"On the fourth day the programmers found the plan of the installation, based on a series of diagrams, was probably going wrong when it started to be oriented towards the collection of individual projects rather than the consequence of a comprehensive and coherent concept."¹⁴

"I couldn't really understand the hidden concept...but the feeling of running from one project to the another, in the dark, gave a new aspect to the whole construction. I was one of the linkages between the projects."¹⁵

Naming:

"the plan is a temporal field of application and movement"¹⁶

"a museum of silent cocoons"¹⁷

" a textile imbroglio...always a moment of middle (milieu) and multiple entranceways."¹⁸

"..the work is a reality in itself."¹⁹

Appropriating:

"The generative methodology is something that I would like to utilise throughout my thesis project, regularly reducing my ideas and aims to one sentence/image/adjective/noun/verb."²⁰

"My project, the wall of Cádiz, is in the same quandary as the experiment."²¹

Interpreting value:

"able to recognise the dense quality of the old city, open space of the new city"²²

"hard to translate...much more game elements than aesthetic feeling"²³

"it is the process of making and assembly and the creation of connections between the projects that acts as the architecture."²⁴

"Lack of rigorous orientation...the linkage between elements paused on the surface"²⁵

"The piece can stand many unpickings."²⁶

¹⁴ Tao Wang, MArch student

¹⁵ Nassia Spyridaki, MSc student

¹⁶ Sarah Castle, MArch student

¹⁷ Emma Bush, MArch student

¹⁸ Euan Cockburn, MArch student

¹⁹ Annabel Cremer, MSc student

²⁰ Imogen Hogg, MArch student

²¹ Boyin Yang, MArch student

²² Marianna Kotilea, MSc student

²³ Zhitong Wu, MArch student

²⁴ Craig Hutchison, MArch student

²⁵ Xiaoyan Hou, MSc student

Fig 5 Still from film of the making of the CCPO

The project output drew attention to a rich discussion relating to temporal aspects of urbanism. Comments and observations from the review panel included 'A project about time and urbanism', 'a performative articulated drawing', 'the necessity of the body in urbanism', 'Apollo and Dionysius', 'tensions and relations- what happens when a part is taken away or fails', 'abstraction rather than representation'. It was generative as 'a new' piece of work, providing ways of thinking, acting, and specific connective moves to take back to the study city/project territories. The performative mode of practice which was set up enabled ideas and implementation to shift from individual outlook to collective endeavour, and students to some extent became 'machine' as well as 'operator' in Eisenmann's terms²⁷.

Peter Eisenmann has described that he sees one of the key functions of the computer as a tool/ instrument which makes possible a detachment or displacement of 'what we see' from 'what we know'. In pursuing architectural knowledge through 'pure production', he has written about electronic culture as a method, instrument, inspiration, tool and guidance of the process of design practice/production. Agents are the operator, the machine, and the model laboratory. While much has been focused on possibilities of the machine's transformative actions, and a paradigm shift from static *point-plane-line* to dynamic *vector-field-time* conceptualising, less explicit is the often intuitive role of the operator in relation to the machine, and the machine and operator(s) place(s) in the often contingent context of the laboratory/ studio. Eisenmann's design practice, while explicitly celebrating electronic culture, also continues to defend processes of manual making, testing and collaborative dialogue.

Summary

'To experiment' encompasses a range of activity and methodology ranging from the test of a very particular limited question to investigations, attempts, sometimes tentative or provisional speculations. In all cases experiments deal with some sort of new ground. In architectural design, where studio teaching is often perceived of as essentially experimental, the role and placing of an experiment needs to be carefully understood and defined. How does it differ from design knowledge, design exercises?

²⁶ Emma Bush, MArch student

Are the framed question(s), objectives, methodology, tools, conceptions about architecture and the architect or versions of an 'innovative' design solution, the experimental aspects of the pedagogy? What is discovered about the new ground, and how does this inform future experiments and/or design practice?

The one-off project scrutinised in this paper, the *Cádiz City Planning Office*, was experimental in terms of pedagogic methodology in the design studio. This can be understood as a performative framework or practice and was fundamental to project conception, implementation, and enhanced student learning. Collective practice clearly provides opportunity for an alternative to increasingly individualised/atomised digital modes of working, consciously enabling the acting out and negotiating of roles and working relationships between students detached from individual project egos. The studio is understood as a contingent context of *operator-machine-laboratory* production. I would argue that the new ground discovered in this experiment was primarily the possibilities of collective design practice, questioning the implementation of design ideas and of the role of the architect in an urban context, worked through one loosely normative bureaucratic model. The project gave the studio cohort a collective confidence which has impacted on attitudes to subsequent small group and individual production. Secondly, new ground discovered for this cohort of students was the generative potential of work which is 'of itself'.

²⁷ Galofaro, L *Digital Eisenmann: an office of the electronic era* (Italy, Birkhauser, 1999)